



Draft Memorandum Regarding UNC-TV Series on Alcoa

The attached is a draft memorandum prepared by a panel of three professors from the UNC School of Journalism & Mass Communication regarding a three-part series about Alcoa that was broadcast on UNC-TV on July 6-8.

The professors were asked to provide their collective opinion on whether the series met universally accepted standards of journalism and whether they would have accepted the segments for broadcast.

The request originated with Tom Howe, director and general manager of UNC-TV. However, Mr. Howe later informed the professors that he wanted to postpone the review of the series. As a result, the draft memorandum was never issued. However, given the unfounded and damaging claims about Alcoa contained in the UNC-TV report, we believe it is important that the entire report be made public.

The attached draft memorandum was provided by UNC to Alcoa's attorney in response to a public records request. Alcoa is solely responsible for the decision to distribute the draft memorandum further.

Three members of the faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were asked to review a recent series of reports aired on UNC-TV. Those reports concerned water rights on the Yadkin River.

Whether a licensing agreement between Alcoa and the federal government would, or should, be renewed appeared to be at the heart of these reports. Associated issues – issues concerning Alcoa’s stewardship of the natural resources in the area – also were in play. There were accusations of the improper and illegal disposal of toxic waste; accusations of workplace safety violations, as well as concerns about Alcoa’s activities in other parts of the United States.

All that notwithstanding, the underlying question the UNC-TV news team appears to have wanted to answer became: Considering Alcoa’s history should this license be renewed for another 50 years, especially since the quid pro quo involving as many as 1,000 local jobs is no longer in play?

The three-member review team was appointed by Dr. Jean Folkerts, dean of the journalism school, upon the request of Tom Howe, director and general manager of UNC-TV. The team was made up of Leroy Towns, Andy Bechtel and Jim Hefner. (The backgrounds and credentials of these three professors are available on the school’s website under “faculty and staff.”)

This group’s mission was outlined in an email from Mr. Howe to Mr. Hefner: “I am interested in your collective opinion on whether these (series of news reports) meet universally accepted standards of journalism, and whether you would have accepted them for broadcast.”

Just how we wanted to consider that question was up to us, Mr. Howe advised. In addition, each of us would be offered an “honorarium” of \$250 for our time and labor on this question.

The group decided the review would be limited in large measure to a viewing of the three-part series, and the method with which these reports made it to air – the granting of editorial control over the series to the reporter by UNC-TV under apparent pressure from state legislators. We ignored other issues, although we are aware of many of those issues thanks to news coverage. Rather, we decided

to only consider the work at hand and attempt to answer the question at hand: “...would (we) have accepted them for broadcast” in their current form?

Simply put, our answer is a collective *no*.

It is our opinion there was a breakdown in the editorial process at UNC-TV – as well as the establishment of an unfortunate precedent – when management abdicated its responsibilities and allowed the reporter to control the final work product. The result was a series of stories proffering an apparent point of view unsupported by the facts. This action – the abdication of editorial control by management of UNC-TV and the resulting broadcast of these stories – not only tarnished the reputation of a valued state resource, UNC-TV, but, more importantly, presented an unbalanced and slanted view of this important public issue. We would consider this abdication of editorial control by management ill-advised.

We will not examine the story line-by-line. Instead, we are only considering what appear to be three holes presented by the series. They are as follows:

1. Have the Baden Works and/or the hydro-electric facilities located on the Yadkin River and operated by Alcoa been cited by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), or some other federal agency charged with protection of the environment and natural resources? “Visitations” and “citations” are not the same thing. Citations and the like are a matter of public record. It would appear the reporter depended on other sources, perhaps a plaintiffs’ lawyer, for all such documentation. Why did the reporter not seek out these public records herself? And, finally, why did the reporter not speak with someone from the EPA?
2. If, in fact, the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has had a “counter measures plan” from Alcoa for 30 years, as the pieces suggest, and has not acted on it, one wonders why? Why has the state not acted on this plan; has the state cited Alcoa for environmental breaches, and why did DENR originally support the relicensing of Alcoa on the Yadkin? Does it take 30 years to read a report and act on it? Finally, why was no one from DENR interviewed?

3. The reporter depends a great deal on a lawyer representing hundreds of Alcoa employees. A number of what appear to be active lawsuits were cited in the series. Has Alcoa been found negligent in any of the suits specifically dealing with the Baden Works or the surrounding Yadkin River area? Why was this information not included, one way or the other?

Were the accusations of environmental irresponsibility a product of the state's interest in retaking the four hydro-electric dams in question, or were these accusations a convenient tactic considering the apparent interests of the state, Stanly County, and others? It was difficult for us to tell. If the state was so concerned about environmental problems along the Yadkin, why had it not been addressing these concerns for years? Has it? The report is silent on this issue. Alcoa admits there have been environmental irregularities in the area, especially considering the fact that the operations have been around since the early 1900s. These concerns could and should have been raised, in our opinion, in the series. The series lacked such inquiry.

Finally, on the question of abdicating control of the editorial process we have a suggestion. There are times when a news organization, itself, becomes part of the story. We do not think this was the case from the information we have been provided in this particular situation. Rather, it would appear a state-controlled operation, UNC-TV, which depends on the state for funding, was accused by some powerful legislators of attempting to manage the story in question; to slant the story from the perspective of Alcoa, or kill the story, outright. It is our view that UNC-TV management should have not wavered in light of such criticism; should have maintained editorial control and reported the story.

That said, if management felt it could not fairly edit the series, other options were available other than granting editorial control of the series to the reporter. The editorial process could have been transferred to another news organization. There are a number of prominent and respected local, commercial television news operations which could have handled the job. Or management of UNC-TV could have employed an outside contractor to have handled the editorial process – a retired news executive, a professor at the school of journalism, a national figure in

the world of journalism or public broadcasting. There could have been any number of people who could have been employed for such duties. Granting free rein to this reporter, or any reporter, is no substitute – no option – in our opinion.

The series should not have aired in the form it did, and UNC-TV should not have abdicated editorial control over the supervision of the series.